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President defends CIA deals

Says nothing illegal is found in payments to foreign leaders

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Washington — President Carter said yesterday he has "not found anything illegal or improper" in reported secret Central Intelligence Agency payments of millions of dollars to foreign leaders.

Making his first public statement on the reported agency payments at a nationally televised news conference, Mr. Carter repeated his campaign vows to disclose publicly improprieties and illegalities in intelligence operations.

At the same time, he indicated he takes a fairly broad view of what is proper and legal, including apparently payments such as the reported one of millions of dollars over 20 years to King Hussein of Jordan.

And he made it quite clear that, like past presidents, he believes that secrecy is essential in protecting the nation's intelligence operations.

"It can be extremely damaging to our relationship with other nations, to the potential security of our country even in peacetime, for these kinds of operations, which are legitimate and proper, to be revealed," Mr. Carter said. The President said he plans to adhere to the policy, hastily invoked last week after the reports of Central Intelligence Agency payments to King Hussein, of refusing to comment on any specific intelligence agency activity.

And, in effect, he said the American people will have to depend on him for assurance that intelligence operations meet the nation's standards and attitudes.

He said that Adm. Stansfield Turner, who won unanimous approval by the Senate Armed Services Committee yesterday as the new Central Intelligence Agency director, "will try to be sure that everything we do is not only proper and legal but also compatible with the attitudes of the American people."

Beyond that, he said, "I am also assuming on a continuing basis a direct personal responsibility for the operation of all the intelligence agencies in our government to make sure that they are meeting these standards."

In laying out his views on one of the touchiest areas in which a President has to deal, Mr. Carter encountered some skeptical questioning that reflected the repeated controversies that have surrounded the intelligence agency in recent years.

President Nixon repeatedly cited "national security" as he involved the agency in a broad range of questionable activities, including the Watergate scandal and domestic surveillance, that led to last year's congressional probe into the Central Intelligence Agency.

Mr. Carter conceded that he was making a "value judgment" in ratifying what he said was the view of the independent Intelligence Oversight Board established by President Ford about the propriety of Central Intelligence Agency operations. But he said he has talked to Senator Daniel K. Inouye (D., Hawaii), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, and added, "I think that he would also confirm that the impropriety or illegality does not exist on any ongoing CIA operation."

It was not immediately clear why he used the qualifying word "ongoing" after

earlier saying he had found no illegality or impropriety in any CIA operation.

The President said he was "quite concerned" about the number of people who have had access to intelligence information, a number he said he is trying to reduce. And he appeared to be plainly annoyed at some of the news reports on the alleged payments, calling some "quite erroneous," while saying others had "some degree of accuracy."

During the presidential campaign, Mr. Carter had pledged that, in the event of wrongdoing by intelligence agencies, he would immediately go before the public to lay out the errors, the proposed corrective actions and take the blame.

A top White House aide explained after Mr. Carter's news conference that the President was referring in his pledge to admit to any mistake made by his administration, not mistakes by prior administrations.

"If somebody else, exercising their best judgement which he later finds was in part or in total not what ought to be done, it is our opinion that we're not committed . . . to stand up and hold that decision to public criticism," the aide said.

And he noted that when "your expressed intent or even your heart-felt desire runs head on into what is in the best interests of the nation, your interest yields."

The aide also appeared to indicate that Mr. Carter felt the payments to King Hussein were proper, though he reportedly has cut them off.

"Not speaking of any specific case, you might decide to make changes in things that you're not in a position to make a value judgment on that it is altogether improper and altogether illegal," he said.